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ABSTRACT

Data gathered in a study of news coverage of the parttime Indiana and fulltime Michigan state legislatures were used to determine if source use in stories, portrayals of lawmakers and of the legislature as a whole, and topic coverage varied with the length of the legislative session. A content analysis was conducted of the 111 stories written by the 14 statehouse reporters covering the Indiana legislature's two-month session, and of 151 stories written by 15 statehouse reporters covering a two-month period of the unlimited Michigan session. Thirteen different sources, grouped in four general types, were recorded for each story: activity sources, such as floor votes; interview sources, such as committee chairs; print sources, such as bills; and background sources, such as books. Stories were also coded for the portrayals of lawmakers and the legislature as a whole, and for principal topics. Results indicated that reporters covering the Indiana legislature used fewer sources, held fewer interviews, dealt with legislative life more narrowly, and gave sustained attention to fewer topics than did reporters covering the Michigan legislature. (FL)

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LEGISLATIVE STRUCTURE AND REPORTING STYLE: STATEHOUSE COVERAGE OF PARTTIME VS. FULLTIME LEGISLATURES

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ABSTRACT FOR: Legislative Structure and Reporting Style: Statehouse Coverage of Parttime vs. Fulltime Legislatures

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A comparison of the newspaper coverage of the parttime Indiana legislature and the fulltime Michigan legislature suggests an association between session length and reporting in terms of sources used, legislative portrayals and topic attention. Reporters covering the parttime Indiana legislature used fewer sources in stories, interviewed legislators less frequently, dealt with legislative life more narrowly, and gave sustained attention to fewer topics than did reporters covering the fulltime Michigan statehouse.

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More than 60 years ago, Walter Lippmann bluntly asserted that the press by itself was incapable of finding truth. For Lippmann, the role of the press was to report the truth that society's institutions and experts uncovered. Indeed, the better those truth-finding institutions, "the more issues are disentangled, the more objective criteria are introduced, the more perfectly an affair can be presented as news." (Lippmann, 1922: p. 229)

Journalists today might contend that interpretative and investigative reporting indicate a more independent role for the press in the quest for truth. But as Lippmann suggests, at least the quality of routine news must vary with the access of reporters to institutions and to the information those institutions collect.

This paper explores how the news reporting of state legislatures is determined not so much by the press as by a crucial characteristic of the institutions themselves--the time constraints imposed by the larger society. Specifically, news coverage of a parttime and a fulltime legislature is examined to illuminate differences in the sources used, in the ways in which legislators and their work are portrayed, and in the concentration of news attention on public issues.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding the news coverage of state legislatures may be particularly important over the next few years. Federal budget cutbacks and the possible shifting of power to the states may focus more public demands on state legislatures. The way reporters inform citizens about state legislative decisions will become increasingly important for how those decisions are made. Both reporters and lawmakers at the state level are bound to become more important as a result.

A number of factors obviously affect the quality of such coverage. News organization size and resources affect the number of correspondents that can be assigned to the Capitol. Editorial influences and pressures affect the quality of their reporting. So too, of course, do the experience and ability of the reporters covering the statehouse.

However, factors having more to do with newsmakers and with governmental institutions may better explain variations in news coverage quality. In particular, news organizations must depend on sources in governmental institutions. The qualities of those news sources thus may determine the ultimate quality of the news reports.

Studies by mass communication researchers have frequently noted the leading role of officials and institutions in generating news. Gans (1979), Sigal (1973) and Epstein (1973), for instance, have emphasized that newsroom organizational needs compel dependence on widely-known and recognized governmental sources able to generate news efficiently and reliably. Tuchman (1978) suggests that the very definition of news emerges from such dependence. Weaver and Wilhoit (1980) in their study of press coverage of the U.S. Senate found that the individual activity of senators was the most important predictor of news coverage. Miller (1977) found that constituency size made U.S. Senators more likely to get coverage than representatives, with the president as the "ultimate spokesman" able to command media attention at will through his role as the sole national representative.

The mass communication literature dealing specifically with news coverage of state legislatures has often focused on factors

emanating from the newsroom rather than from the institutions covered. Torgerson (1973), for instance, explored reporter perceptions of the demands of editors to predict "digging" and "reaction reporting" behavior in covering the Iowa legislature. Hilton (1967) in a Washington statehouse study was able to classify reporters as "diggers," "craft-oriented" and "frustrated idealists" on the basis of their news value priorities. Dunn (1969) in his study of Wisconsin statehouse reporters found behavior governed by role "self-concept," which he defined as the "overarching purpose" reporters saw in their work.

In a study of legislative sources, however, Fico (1984) probed the reasons reporters used particular Indiana State Senators. He found that reporters tended to concentrate on a few senators considered "useful" for their powerful institutional positions, expertise, knowledge of the legislative process and accessibility.

Assuming that reporters are accurate observers of characteristics in others crucial to their own work, the question that emerges is what makes for expertise, legislative proficiency and accessibility in lawmakers. Clearly the time lawmakers can devote to their work is crucial to all three. Thus, a plausible assumption is that an important organizational influence on both lawmaking and news reporting is likely to be the length of the legislative session. Reporters usually are generalists who rely on knowledgeable, expert and accessible sources. The more an institution generates such sources, the better the press will be able to report the public policy issues with which those sources deal. Therefore, time pressures constraining the work of legislators may also degrade the ultimate quality of the news reports for which they serve as sources.

The political science literature seems to suggest that the length of the legislative session is indeed an important factor in its functioning. But the actual effect of session length has not been explored very much or very explicitly.

Jewell and Patterson have noted, for instance, that limits on the length and frequency of sessions weaken opportunities for deliberation, the effectiveness of committees, and the ability of members to develop experience and become acquainted with legislative norms. "No single factor has a greater effect on the legislative environment than the constitutional restriction on the length of session," they assert. (Jewell and Patterson, 1973: p. 151)

Indeed, constitutional limitations on session length can be considered a resource constraint emanating from the larger society. Hedlund has noted that while researchers have considered resources important for the goal accomplishment of organizations, certain resources like time have been "frequently ignored or given little attention." (Hedlund, 1984: p. 65) In his review of the literature on organizational analysis of legislatures, Hedlund reported only one study besides the Jewel and Patterson work that explored any relationship between session length and organizational performance. That study found that legislative business expanded to fill the time available for it.

Hedlund also suggests that little systematic information has been collected on the impact of such legislative organizational characteristics on non-legislative forces. The press especially seems to have been ignored in this regard. This examination of the quality of news coverage of parttime and fulltime state legislatures thus attempts to help extend both mass communication and

political science research on this topic.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The quality of coverage of legislative sessions of different length can be assessed in several ways. The number and kind of sources used in stories will importantly influence the amount of information in those stories and the perspectives through which that information is presented. For example, stories relying on only one source ususally will contain less information and fewer perspectives than stories relying on more than one source. Interview stories will probably contain more explanation than stories relying on press conferences. Further, stories relying on combinations of sources -- for example, interviews and documents -- usually will contain significantly more and better information and perspectives than stories relying on a single type of source -- for example, reporter observation of committee meetings.

Stories also will vary in the contexts they use to describe lawmakers and the legislative institution. For example, stories may focus on a legislator introducing or opposing legislation. Stories also may focus on the lawmaker's more general political philosophy, opinions, and activities. In terms of the entire institution, stories may concentrate on the mechanical procedures of bill introduction and passage, or deal more extensively with the issues and underlying concerns behind particular pieces of legislation.

Finally, the quality of coverage may vary with the continuity with which certain subjects are treated. The coverage may focus superficially on a large number of discrete items, or more extensive coverage may be given to a smaller number of topics.

Three general research questions thus guide the comparison of

the coverage of parttime and fulltime legislatures:

1. Does source use in stories vary with the length of the legislative session?

2. Do portrayals of lawmakers and of the legislature as a whole vary with length of the legislative session?

3. Does topic coverage vary with length of the legislative session?

METHODOLOGY

This study reports findings from a content analysis of the news coverage of the entire 1982 session of the Indiana Senate and of a two-month period from the 1983 session of the Michigan statehouse.[1] Indiana is one of 16 legislatures whose sessions are limited to no more than 60 legislative days. This study reports findings on the news coverage of the Senate during the 30-day "short session" of the Indiana General Assembly that began in January 1982 and concluded in late February. During that period, some 900 bills were proposed. Michigan is one of 19 states with no limit on the length of the session. The content analysis of the coverage of the Michigan legislature began in February 1983 and concluded in early April. During that period, about 648 bills were proposed.[2]

The Indiana content analysis included 111 stories written by 14 statehouse bureau reporters working for seven newspapers. The Michigan content analysis included 151 stories written by 15 statehouse bureau reporters working for six newspapers.[3] A subset of 58 Michigan stories dealing with the Senate or Senators also was analyzed to assess potential differences related to legislative chamber.

Thirteen different sources, grouped in four general source types, were recorded for each story.[4] These included activity

sources such as floor votes, interview sources such as interviews with committee chairs, print sources such as bills, and background sources such as books.

Stories also were coded for the portrayals of up to two lawmakers and of the legislature as a whole.[5] For individual lawmakers, such portrayals could include bill introduction or opposition, corruption, and general comments on legislative and non-legislative topics. For the institution, portrayals could include bill-related procedures, debate, and partisan activity.

Each story also was coded for its principal topic.[6] Such topics, for example, included school funding controversies in both Indiana and in Michigan, toxic waste problems in Michigan, and a presidential visit in Indiana.

FINDINGS

Source Use

Stories written about the Michigan legislature tended to use more sources than stories written about the Indiana Senate. Only 13 percent of the Michigan stories were based on a single source, compared to 27 percent for Indiana. Indeed, about 65 percent of the Michigan stories relied on three or more sources, compared to only 38 percent of the Indiana stories. (See Table I) About two-thirds of the Michigan Senate stories also relied on three or more sources.

Michigan stories overall tended to rely more on interviews, while Indiana stories tended to rely much more on reporter observation of activities or readily available printed bills. In Indiana, about one in five stories was based on reporter observation of some activity such as a floor vote or committee meeting. Only 6

percent of the Michigan stories were similarly based. (See Table I)

By contrast, a third of the Michigan stories relied on interviews alone, and another 29 percent relied on a combination of interviews and observation of activities. About a quarter of the Michigan Senate stories relied on interviews alone, while 40 percent used the combination of activities and interviews. Only 8 percent of the Indiana stories relied solely on interviews, and another 9 percent relied on the combination of activity observation and interviews.

For Indiana stories, the most often relied upon combination of sources was observation of activities and use of printed bills. This combination was the principal source in 32 percent of the Indiana stories, compared to only 2 percent for the Michigan stories.

The Michigan stories thus were much more likely to contain interviews with legislative actors than were the Indiana stories. Thirty-four percent of the Michigan stories contained interviews with legislative leaders, nearly three times the Indiana proportion. (See Table I) Some 43 percent of Michigan Senate stories contained leader interviews.

Twenty-three percent of the Michigan stories contained interviews with committee chairs, compared to 15 percent for the Indiana stories. Twenty-nine percent of Michigan Senate stories contained interviews with committee chairs.

Finally, 32 percent of the Michigan stories featured interviews with ordinary lawmakers, compared to only 6 percent for the Indiana stories. Forty percent of the Michigan Senate stories used interviews with rank and file legislators.

Legislative Portrayals

Indiana stories were somewhat more likely than Michigan stories

to give narrow portrayals to both individual lawmakers and to the institution as a whole. (See Table II) Stories from both statehouses were about equally likely to portray the first lawmaker in the story as advocating or opposing specific legislation. However, 34 percent of the Michigan stories portrayed the legislator in a more general role as commentator on legislative developments, compared to only 7 percent for Indiana stories. Fourteen percent of the Michigan senator stories used this portrayal. Indiana stories were, however, more likely to contain other portrayals such as partisan activity or corruption.

If the second official mentioned in a story was a legislator, however, then Michigan stories were more likely to deemphasize the bill advocate or opponent portrayal. Indiana stories remained as likely to use that portrayal for the second mentioned legislator as for the first. (See Table II) Similarly, stories mentioning Michigan Senators second also were more likely to use other contexts.

In portraying the legislature as a whole, Indiana stories were more likely than Michigan stories to focus on the procedures and debate contexts as bills wound their way through the legislative process. Sixty-two percent of the Indiana stories focused on legislative procedures or debate over bills, compared to 31 percent for the Michigan stories. The remaining Michigan stories featured such contexts as partisan activity or relations with other branches or levels of government. Some 21 percent of the Michigan Senate stories used the procedures and debate contexts.

Story Topics

Government and school finances dominated the business of both legislatures, but reporters covering these sessions placed very different levels of emphasis on these and other topics. In general,

Indiana coverage was much more varied than Michigan coverage. Fifty-six different topics were covered during the study period in Indiana, compared to 30 topics in Michigan. But Michigan topics tended to get more stories each. In Michigan, about 20 percent of those topics got five or more stories each, compared to only 9 percent of the topics in Indiana. In fact, 71 percent of the Indiana topics got only a single story, compared to 47 percent for the Michigan topics. (See Table III)

Further, the six topics in Michigan getting five or more stories accounted for three-quarters of the entire story output there, with the tax increase topic alone getting 40 percent of the total stories. In Indiana, five topics getting five or more stories each accounted for only 35 percent of the total. As in Michigan, a tax increase topic led the list, but only with about 9 percent of the story total. (See Table III)

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

A comparison of the coverage of the parttime Indiana legislature and the fulltime Michigan legislature suggests an association between session length and reporting in terms of sources used, legislative portrayals and topic attention. Reporters covering the parttime Indiana legislature used fewer sources in stories, interviewed legislators less frequently, dealt with legislative life more narrowly, and gave sustained attention to fewer topics than did reporters covering the fulltime Michigan statehouse. The legislative chamber being covered seemed to make little difference in the source findings.

The major prescriptive implication of these findings is that citizens can only be as well informed as the institutions of

government that they establish. The press, as Lippmann noted more than 60 years ago, can only be as complete, thorough and probing in its reporting as the institutions it covers. More specifically, findings from this study suggest that whatever benefits fulltime legislatures may have for governance, they have a major, beneficial influence on the quality of information about governmental activities transmitted to citizens.

This study of course does not illuminate the causal link between session length and such reporting qualities. Content analysis alone cannot be used to infer to the motives of those who created the communications analyzed. However, a strong link seems plausible theoretically, and is indicated empirically by the findings from this comparative study. Clearly the next step is to gather data from reporters to probe specifically the ways in which they perceive and respond to reporting problems in the different legislatures.

Obviously too, no single factor can account for all the variance in something as complex as the news coverage of a legislative body. Influences on that coverage arising from other differences in both the media and legislative organizations also are important. Certainly the quality of news coverage depends in some measure upon the commitment and resources of news organizations and their personnel as well as on the nature of the institutions covered.

Still, this study suggests that both political scientists and mass communications researchers should explore further such resources as time. Considering time as a resource constraint on the work styles of both officials and the reporters covering their activities can further our understanding of how news about public policy reaches the public.

NOTES

1. The Indiana session convenes in the first week of January and in 1982 concluded on February 21. The Michigan legislature also convenes the first week of January. The Michigan content analysis began in February 1983 to avoid the large number of stories dealing with the new Democratic governor and the details of legislative organization.

Although the two legislatures were studied in different years, the purpose was not so much to compare what reporters covered in those institutions, but how they covered them. Reporting techniques do not change much from one year to another. The patterns of reliance on common techniques are the focus of this study.

2. Common content categories were used for the stories for both states. A "legislative" news story was considered to be any article that made a reference of at least four lines to any lawmaker or to the legislatures as a whole.

3. Both story samples included the two major newspapers in each state. In Indiana, the two major papers are the Indianapolis Star and the Indianapolis News. In Michigan, the two major papers are the Detroit Free Press and the Detroit News.

4. Activity Sources included floor votes and debates, committee meetings and press conferences.

Interview Sources included interviews with legislative leaders, with committee chairs, with rank and file lawmakers, and interviews with non-legislative sources.

Print Sources included printed bills, reports, other documents, and news releases.

Backgound Sources included media reports and books or other scholarly documents.

5. A number of different portrayals were coded. The major portrayals shared in the two studies include: leadership; bill advocate/opponent; partisan; combinations of above; corruption; informer/interpreter of legislation; comments and reactions on legislative topics; appointments to posts; and features on life or lifestyle.

An Intracoder reliability test on lawmaker portrayals for the Indiana Senate data coded by the author produced an 87 percent agreement. An Intercoder reliability test for the Michigan data coded by the author and two graduate students produced an 83 percent agreement.

Portrayals of the legislatures included emphasis on bill procedures; emphasis on the collective institution; partisanship; debate and opinions; and combinations of the above.

An Intracoder reliability test for the Indiana Senate data coded by the author produced a 72 percent agreement. An Intercoder reliability test for the Michigan data coded by the author and two graduate students produced a 73 percent agreement.

6. For this comparison, topics are considered only in terms of their relative concentration of journalistic attention rather than on the merits of the topics themselves.

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TABLE II: Portrayals of Michigan and Indiana Lawmakers in Stories Written by Statehouse Bureau Newspaper Stories

	Michigan (N=38)	Indiana (N=104)
Legislator Mentioned First*		
Bill Advocate or Opponent	50%	54%
Comments on Issues	34	7
Other	16	39
Legislator Mentioned Second*	(N=68)	(N=63)
Bill Advocate or Opponent	44	57
Comments on Issues	23	19
Other	33	24

* In the Michigan study, other state officials as well as lawmakers were coded, and lawmakers who were not mentioned first or second in the story therefore were not coded. In Indiana, the first two lawmakers were coded regardless of their positions relative to other state officials mentioned in the story.

TABLE III: Attention to Topics Covered in Michigan and Indiana Legislative Stories Written by Statehouse Bureau Newspaper Reporters

Stories Devoted To Topics

	Michigan (T=30)	Indiana (T=56)
Topics Getting Five or More Stories	20%	9%
Topics Getting Two to Four Stories	33	20
Topics Getting Only One Story	47	71

Top Stories Covered (Topics getting five or more stories)

	Michigan (N=151)	Indiana (N=111)
Tax Increases	40%	9%
Budget Deficits/Cuts	11	---
School Finance	9	9
Toxic Wastes	8	---
Reagan Visit	---	6
Lottery Bill	---	6
"Bills" Summary Stories	---	5
Mansour Appointment	4	---
Business Incentives	3	---